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MIST

By

Huan (Abby) Liao

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IMAGING ARTS/COMPUTER ANIMATION
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION
COLLEGE OF IMAGING ARTS AND SCIENCES

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
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Also, I want to show my genuine thanks to my other two thesis committee members - Professor Peter Murphey and Professor David Halbstein. Both helped me to exam the ideas and techniques of expression, especially during the pre-production stage. Peter gave me great critiques about the visuals and music. In addition, he sent me e-mails with inspirational videos. David showed great interests in my ideas as well and gave me very useful suggestions of experimental directions.

My composer Nicholas Schantz was very important throughout the whole process of my thesis production. His music accounts for half of the film, and I couldn't imagine my film without it. It interacts with and complements the visuals naturally. Nicholas is so talented that he studied and utilized the Chinese traditional instrument that he had never tried before in this music. Moreover, he was so patient with me and made all the changes I suggested during the one-year production time.

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends, who gave me support and courage from the very beginning. Without them, I could not have finished my film on time.

ABSTRACT

Mist is an abstract, animated graduate thesis film with a duration of five minutes. It is an extremely personal film, which is inspired by my childhood memories and Chinese culture. It is a reflection of my own life, which just like the fluid ink in the film, reacts with the environment naturally and leaves distinct marks on the paper of my life.

This is a live action and 2D animation mixed film that was produced with After Effects and Premiere software. The primary plan was to produce this film in 3D. However, in order to achieve a more dynamic look, I eventually made changes in my medium. The majority of the footage in the film was shot in live action and edited in After Effects.

This thesis paper is about the creation of *Mist* from my point of view. It involves the generation of the ideas, experiments and trials, production processes and the challenges I encountered.

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INTRODUCTION

In my three years of MFA study in the United States I took every opportunity to try different things and challenge myself. I found abstract film as a genre that I really liked. However, I didn't have the chance and courage to create one until the end of my second year of graduate school. I also always knew that, rooted in my special childhood experience, there was a deep feeling that was looking for an outlet, and an abstract film is the perfect medium. Thus, I decided to make a personal abstract film as a conclusion of my three-year-graduate study at Rochester Institute of Technology.

Because I was brought up in a traditional Chinese culture, everything about me is sealed with a Chinese "trademark". I believed it would be the best fit for my film if I could introduce some Chinese elements in it, for example, traditional Chinese ink and wash paintings and musical instruments. Furthermore, I wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to explore more of the emotions and traditions of my country, and let foreigners know more about these, as well. As a result, my finished film used ink and wash paintings and traditional Chinese music as a basic tone.

Coming up with the concept was the easiest part of my thesis film, because it was just like the blood naturally flowing in my body. However, how to visualize the aesthetic was the most difficult part. In the beginning, I thought as a 3D animator, it would be great if I could make the film in 3D. However, during the process of playing with the materials and techniques I found that utilizing 3D would not work. The organic and natural visuals I wanted were really hard to capture if I only used digital graphics and techniques. I

finally decided to collect my raw materials from shooting real world “beauties” and composite them through After Effects to insert my own inputs and control.

The development of my graduate thesis film, *Mist* began in May 2014 and was completed in May 2015. It is a final project within the MFA animation program in the School of Film and Animation at Rochester Institute of Technology. My thesis was produced under the supervision of my thesis committee members: Prof. Stephanie Maxwell, Prof. Peter Murphey and Prof. David Halbstein.

I will summarize the creation of my film, as well as my thoughts, discoveries and experience in this paper, including:

1. Preproduction: Inspiration, Emotion Structure, Visualization and Music Concept
2. Production: Materials and Techniques Experimentation
3. Postproduction: Compositing and Music finalization
4. Reflections: Experiences, Discoveries and Feedback

There were three main goals that I aspired to achieve in my thesis. The first one was to explore and express my own feelings in abstract form that might lead to an emotional resonance with some of my audience. I didn't expect everyone to understand my feelings or read the film as a “story”, because this is an extremely personal film. However, by through abstraction, an audience can have different interpretations of the work based on their own experiences and emotions.

Secondly, I wanted to make a film where the visuals and the music components harmonize and complement each other to form an appealing film that even some audience won't understand it, but might experience visual and auditory enjoyment.

Finally, I wanted to explore the abstract film form and understand it better in both technique and aesthetics aspects.

INSPIRATION

Certain recurring images from my childhood memories and imaginings have kept haunting me in my dreams over the past twenty years. Such as the place where I lived when I was a baby, my nanny's dark shiny hair, a wooden coffin in a dark forbidden room, a pink shampoo bottle, the image of my nanny being pulled by her hair across a room by a stranger, and so on. I believe these recollections and imaginings must be very important to me, or played a significant role in forming my character in an implicit way. I was so tempted to find out why this was happening and in what way those memories influenced my life. I knew that an abstract film might not help me to find the answer, but it would give me the perfect chance to look back on my childhood memories from a different point of view. Therefore, I wanted to create a personal documentary that relies on abstraction to transport the audience into the emotional landscape of my life.

The Childhood Memories

When I was a baby, just few months after I was born, my parents were so busy running a small business. They realized that they were not able to raise me at home together with my two older sisters. As a result, they hired an old nanny to take care of me. Her name was Jiang. I was raised in Jiang's home, a desirable place for a child to grow up.



FIG A: A similar environment of where I was raised. The hometown of Chairman Mao¹(top); Bamboo woods in China (bottom)

¹ Mao Zedong, commonly referred to as Chairman Mao (Dec. 26, 1893 – Sept. 9, 1976), was a Chinese Communist revolutionary and the founding father of the People's Republic of China, which he governed as Chairman of the Communist Party of China from its establishment in 1949 until his death in 1976.

Jiang's house was a traditional Chinese building, which was made of mud bricks and grey tiles. It was located in a small village in the mid-southern part of China. The house was surrounded by a small mountain at the back, a deep pond on the front side and an endless bamboo forest on the right side of the house. The only way leading to it was a long and narrow unpaved path. It was situated not too far away from my parents' home and had enough space for me to play. But in my childhood perception, it was a place that was isolated from the outside world. And it took forever to go to see my parents.

Jiang's only monetary source was taking care of me. Consequently, she lived a very frugal life. Nonetheless, she was very generous and treated me like her own granddaughter. I can recollect how she always fanned me until I fell asleep at night and gave me snacks whenever she acquired some from others. In spite of the care and attention she gave I felt that there was something still lacking in my life. My parents were constantly busy. As a result, their visits were limited to once a week in order to deliver some groceries to Jiang. My second sister visited me once in a while. Sometimes staying for few days with me. I was so happy when they came because that was the only time I could have delicious food. Also, I didn't have any friends to play with. With my sister being there I had a playmate. Even though we fought a lot I enjoyed her company. It was far better than playing by myself.

In my memories, Jiang was very old but had the most beautiful dark shiny hair I had ever seen. Her hair was jaw-length and combed very neat. She took such great care of her hair. I frequently saw her add some pink, oily liquid in her hair. The pink liquid was stored in a plastic squeeze bottle and was kept far from my reach. Today, while typing these words I feel like I can still smell the unpleasant strong scent of that hair oil. I

remember there was a time I tried to jump up and grab the bottle. Subsequently, I was caught and was scolded by Jiang.

Jiang always told me stories about her late husband. I suspected that these were moments during her loneliness. From her stories, I got to know that her late husband used to abuse her and he died early. They didn't have any biological children, however they had one adopted son. Not long after the son grew up, he left home to look for his birth parents, leaving Jiang alone with an empty house. It was also through these stories I found out why she was possessive about her hair oil bottle. I can't recollect exactly what she told me, but I have images from my dreams that a stranger pulled her hair and dragged her through the room. I speculated that the stranger must have been her husband. She told me that her hair fell out a lot and needed special care. As a result, she dyed her hair black as often as needed.

I have memories very far back, before even being one-year-old. I still remember the first time my parents sent me to Jiang. It was a sunny day and I was happy. My father had me on his back while walking to someplace. I saw an old lady coming from a distance. It was Jiang. It happened right in front of the bamboo forest. She tried to take me from my father. I refused by holding onto my father's neck tightly. I struggled and kept kicking him with my all strength. To calm me down, Jiang made up some ghost stories, which I ended up believing for over ten years. I still remember one story that was about the little deep pond in front of the house. She told me there was a woman who drowned in the pond and became a ghost, living in the water. When it is night she comes to the surface of the water to grab kids' legs to pull them underwater. A lot of naughty kids had been dragged into the pond when they walked near it in the evening. She also

told me that dogs bark at night only when they see a ghost. I believed it, because I have seen a dog's green eyes in the dark. Thus, I got really scared when I heard dogs barking at night for a very long time.

In one of my memories, there is a forbidden dark room in Jiang's house located in the far back. The room contained only one small window that was positioned very high in the back. There was also an old wooden door that connected to the utility room. The room was locked from inside. I was told not to even go close to the room. Nevertheless, my curiosity about the room overcame everything else. I made many attempts to peek inside through a slot in the door. I tried once to enter through the small window by jumping but failed, which resulted in me falling into a ditch below the window. A few years later, with the help of my sister during one of her visits, I was able to see a wooden, dusty black coffin. It sat in the middle of the room supported by some wood beams. There was some other old stuff strewn about here and there. Back then I didn't know why there was a coffin in the room. But I imagine that in the coffin laid Jiang's late husband.

Besides all of those weird memories, I did have some bright ones at Jiang's. I enjoyed sitting in the threshold between my room and the living room. My sister and I sat on it so often that it became polished and very shiny. At times I sat in it while Jiang was feeding me. There were other times I sat in it while waiting for my sisters and parents to visit me. I even took naps in it.

Virtuos Virtuell

The vivid childhood memories served as the main emotional source of my film.

As for the visual inspirations, I was majorly enlightened by Thomas Stellmach² and Maja Oschmann³'s animated experimental film, *Virtuos Virtuell*⁴.

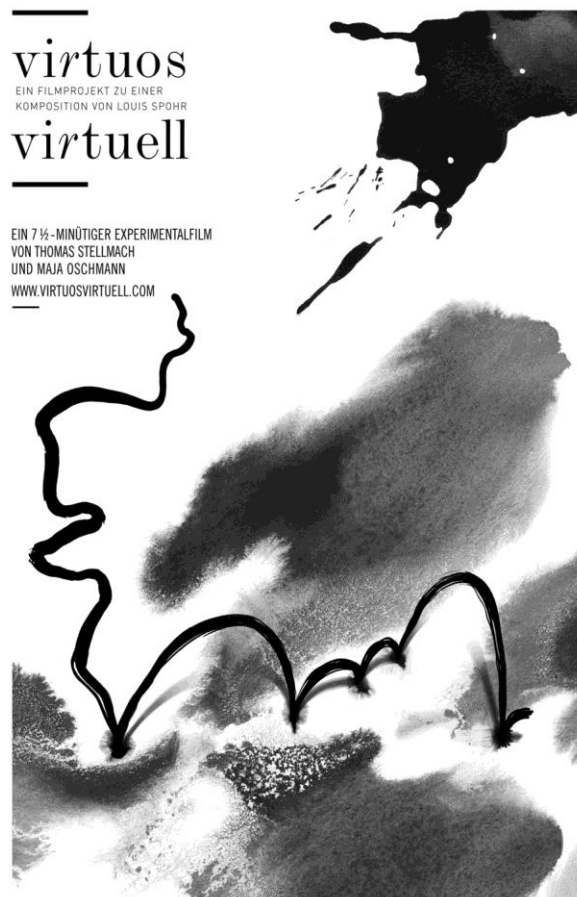


FIG B: The Poster of *Virtuos Virtuell*

² Thomas Stellmach: a Germany animated film producer and director who has received many awards including the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film for his 1996 film *Quest*. See: <http://www.stellmach.com>

³ <http://www.virtuosvirtuell.com/en/content/maja-oschmann>

⁴ *Virtuos Virtuell*. Directed by Thomas Stellmach and Maja Oschmann. Germany: T. Stellmach [prod.];, 2013. DVD.

As I mentioned in my thesis proposal, I wished to develop an interesting and cohesive visual style that utilizes Chinese ink and wash paintings as well as to create a fluid sense of landscape and emotion throughout the work. I started to explore existing works that had been done by other artists and collected interesting references. Some of the samples of visuals that I thought might be used are presented on the next page.

After I pitched my ideas to Prof. Peter Murphey, he recommended me to look at the work of his friend Thomas Stellmach, who co-directed the animated film *Virtuos Virtuell*. I was so impressed by how delicately and powerfully the film paired the ink animation with the music by Louis Spohr⁵ in one piece. I spent a lot of time studying this work.

Virtuos Virtuell is a very successful animation short, which was not only shown in competition in 185 international film festivals, but also received 43 awards. The film “follows a secret choreography of ink drawings which seem to come out of nowhere but take on characteristics and moods of the music and narrate a story that appears to be laid out in the music.”⁶

There are several things I liked about this film and may not agree with other reviews and interpretations. That is, the beauty of abstract film, where you can have a totally different understanding and interpretation from the filmmaker but it can still provide an experience that you can connect with. Firstly, I was amazed by the

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Spohr

⁶ Stellmach, Thomas, and Maja Oschmann. "Virtuos Virtuell." Indielisboa. <http://indielisboa.com/en/film/virtuos-virtuell/>.

filmmakers' ability for storytelling in the abstract form. It creates vivid character solely through the abstraction by using movements, speed, shape, texture, music, etc.

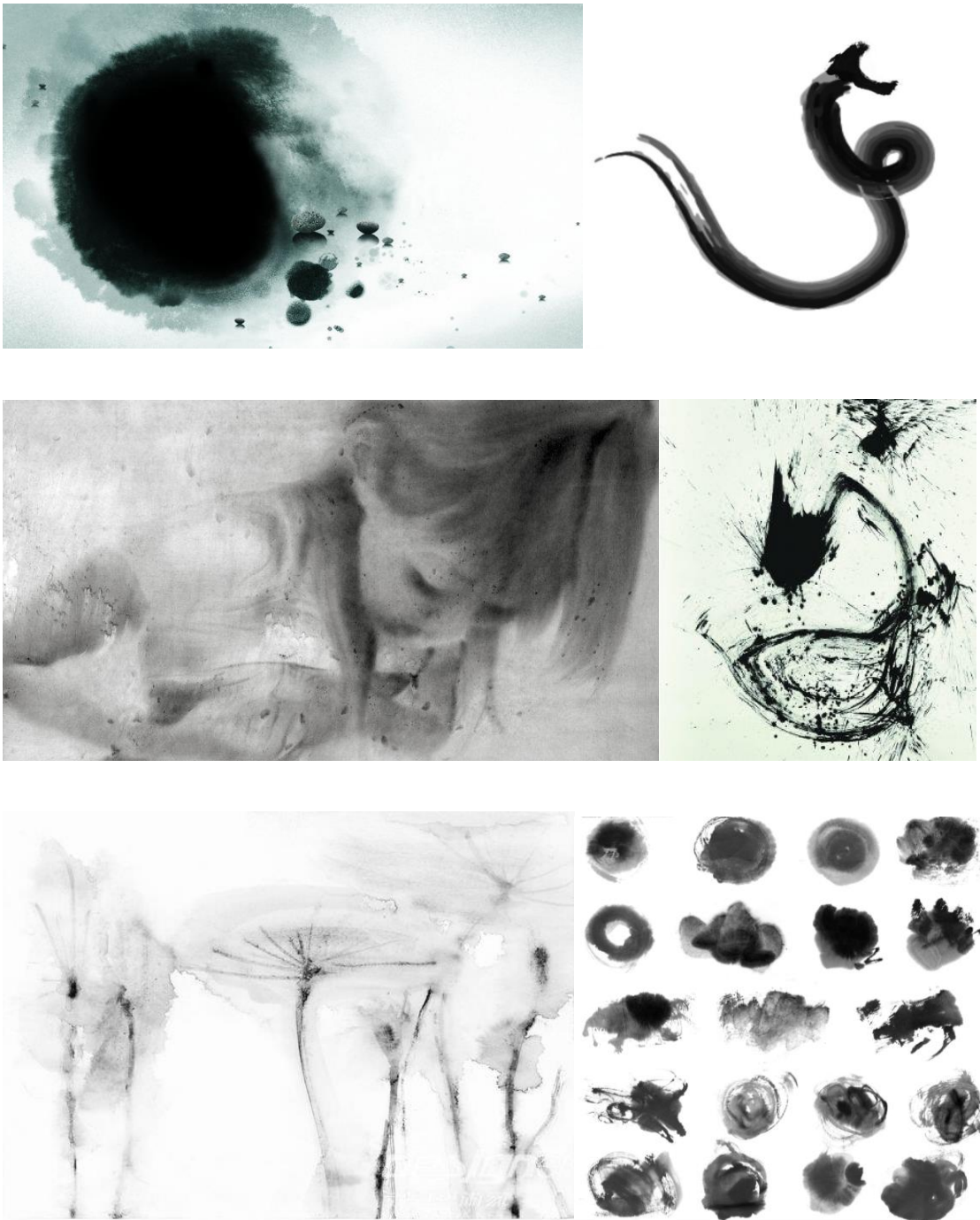


FIG C: Some visual samples found online

A broad range of emotions is delivered through the hand crafted ink drawings coupled with the opera music. The main character in this film, an agile slim ink line, slowly enters the screen with curiosity and caution. After gaining confidence from some ‘safety signals’, it discovers its own movements and starts to dance on the screen with fluent and graceful curves. From the splashing ink drops, we share its excitement and happiness. However, just like all of us do in real life, it encounters difficulties. It stops with hesitation while looking for solutions. Finally, it thinks out of the box, jumping out from its two dimensional world, and finds a way out.

Secondly, I was surprised by how the filmmaker created a complex, deep and spacious three-dimensional world through various ink textures, movements and camera operations. In addition, this is a black and white film where color harmonization is not a challenge, but susceptible to the risk of possible monotony. However, even with limited color options we do not feel bored in this film. That is because the filmmaker creatively leveraged the grayscales, thickness and texture of black and white. On top of that, the naturally-generated shapes and movements of the ink paintings keep it intriguing. And, the three-dimensional world that the subtle but fluent camera operations bring to the film are very wonderful.

Last but not least, the kind of harmony between the opera and visual elements in *Virtuos Virtuell* was exactly what I was looking for in my film. There is no competition between visuals and music, instead the music and visual elements complement each other. Throughout the whole film, we seldom feel one is overriding the other. Most of time, the ink drawings are leading the story. And at other times, the music promotes the development of the plot.

With all the inspirations I gained from my childhood memories and imaginings, and my research of existing art works, I started to construct my film.

PREPRODUCTION

Emotional Structure

Unlike a narrative film, an abstract film usually is not constructed by a clear storyline. My intent was to provide an experience, not to tell a story. Nevertheless, I needed a structure to put all the elements together on a timeline. Also, this was necessary for the communication between my composer and I. In order to visualize my ideas, I followed the graphical design of an electrocardiogram. I structured my film according to my own emotional changes with my memory clips and imaginings. Therefore, I created an emotional structure map for the communication purpose as follows:

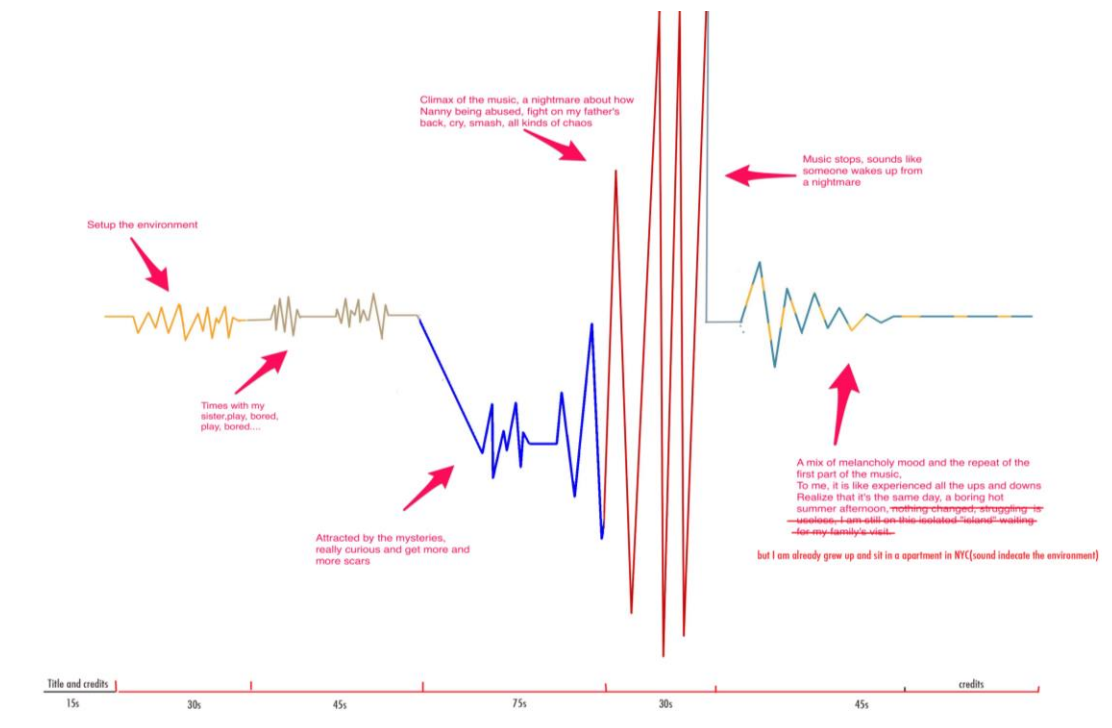


FIG D: Emotional structure with timeline

As shown in the structure, the film can be roughly divided into five parts. They each depict different feelings and emotional states. I start the film in a slow and gentle pace to setup the peaceful atmosphere. This is to reveal the feeling I have whenever I think about the place lived and also to prepare the audience for the film. Then, I try to demonstrate the emotions of my daily life for that period of time. Which was essentially a loop of curiosity and boredom. I think it was because of my loneliness that I had wild imaginings all the time. For the following part, I reveal what happened in my dreams: mostly, the dreams started with my attraction to mysterious things that gradually become frightening. At the terrifying point I bring the climax of the film to the audience, which is mainly driven by the nightmares I had. When the film almost reaches the peak, it stops abruptly with only darkness and silence. That symbolizes the feeling I had: a feeling of being incomplete. In the end, after experiencing all the ups and downs, everything goes back to normal.

Although both my composer and I didn't exactly follow the emotional structure, it provided us the framework for my thesis film. It also served as a starting point for effective and efficient communication between us. We had the overall idea in our minds as we worked, but we also remained open to changes and new ideas.

Visualization

After nailing down the structure of my film, I started to explore how I could bring all the ideas to life. Since it was my first time working on an abstract film, I was very excited about all the possibilities and freedom I had. At this stage, all I knew about my visuals were:

1. I wanted to utilize the 3D techniques that I learned to put more control over the visual part of the film.
2. I desired to use the traditional Chinese ink and wash paintings as the main visual element to create an overall harmonized traditional Chinese atmosphere.
3. I wanted all the visual elements to be abstract and leave enough room for the audience to be able to interpret this film in their own way.

With all these criteria in my mind, I started to create my mood board. I explored so many abstract films that were made in 3D and began to work on my film. But after not too long I found that although I could have full control over the movements and the look of all the visual elements. I was not able to realize the dynamic and organic look that I desired with my current knowledge and ability. I believed there is a trade-off between strict control and the organic appearance in art. So, this became the first challenge I encountered – I needed to choose between the controlled look or the organic look for the visuals. After a long deliberation, I prioritized the organic look and gave up the 3D idea entirely. Prof. Stephanie Maxwell supported me in this decision. And, finally, I decided to shoot most of my film in live action using “raw materials”, and then artistically composite the imagery in After Effects.

With respect to the “Chinese atmosphere” and the abstract form I wanted to be present in my film, I believed the traditional Chinese ink and wash painting was the most suitable element. The following reference describes the Chinese ink wash painting historically

“Ink wash painting, also known as literati painting is an East Asian type of brush painting that uses black ink—the same as used in East Asian calligraphy, in

various concentrations. For centuries, this most prestigious form of Chinese art was practiced by highly educated scholar gentlemen or literati.”⁷

In Asian aesthetic, the goal of ink and wash painting is not simply to reproduce the appearance of the subject, but to capture its spirit in a more abstract way. For example, to paint a horse, the ink wash painting artist will pay more attention to its temperament than its muscles and bones. For a painting of flowers, perfectly depicting its petals and colors is not the painter’s goal; instead, he would aim to convey its liveliness and fragrance.

“East Asian ink wash painting may be regarded as a form of expressionistic art that captures the unseen.”⁸

I thought this was precisely what I wanted to achieve in my abstract film. I wanted to create a metaphor for the constant flowing liquids to reveal the major conditions of my life for the last 25 years: Anxiety and the desire for a more peaceful life. Furthermore, I believed that the techniques commonly used in ink wash painting could be used in my film, as well. For instance, in ink wash paintings, tonality and shading are often achieved by varying the ink density, and I could experiment with media and artistic simulations of ink wash to achieve the ink wash look in my film.

Music and the Musical Instrument - Guzheng

I could not emphasize enough the importance a good musical score to connect with the abstraction in my film. I considered the music, which was composed by Nicholas Schantz to be half of the film. The music helped in forming the emotional structure of the

⁷ "Ink wash painting," *Wikipedia*, last modified on 14 November 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ink_wash_painting.

⁸ Ibid.

whole film, as well as facilitating the Chinese ‘feeling’ that was critical for the film. The music uses a unique musical instrument, called the Guzheng. It is described below.

Guzheng, “also simply called Zheng, is a Chinese plucked zither. It has 18 or more strings and movable bridges, and the modern Guzheng usually has 21 strings and bridges. Guzheng can create sounds that can evoke the sense of a cascading waterfall, thunder, horses' hooves, and even the scenic countryside.”⁹

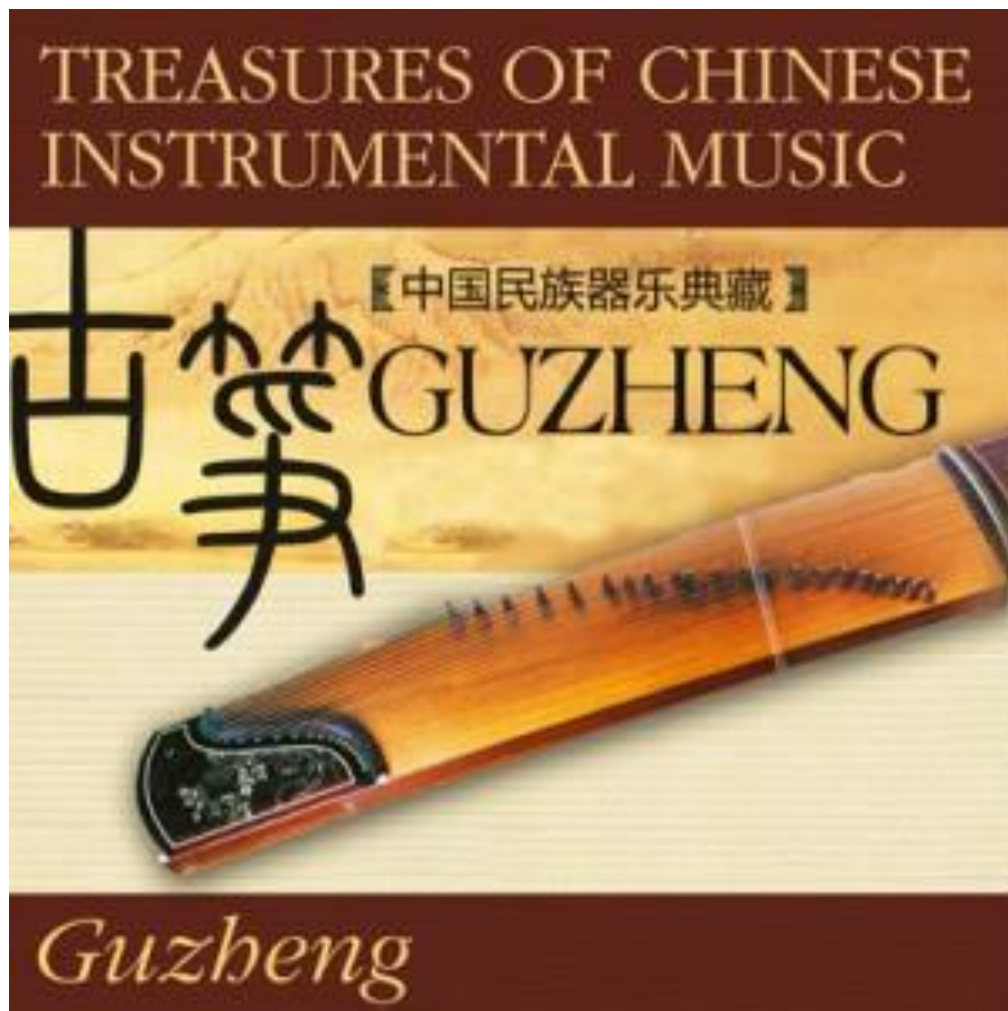


FIG E: The illustration of the musical instrument - Guzheng

⁹ "Guzheng," *Wikipedia*, last modified on 3 November 2015, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guzheng>.

I learned Guzheng when I was ten-years old. I loved it so much and I really wanted to use it in *Mist*. When I first started to look for a composer, I was deliberately searching for someone who is a master of the Guzheng. However, it was very hard for me to find someone in United States, especially in Rochester area. Fortunately, I got to know Nicholas through graduate office's email. He had offered to compose five films or animation works in our school. Nicholas is a very versatile musician. He had never heard of the Guzheng when we first met, but he utilized it in a very creative way in the final work through self-study.

During the thesis production year, the composer and I were communicating at long distance most of the time, but we managed to work jointly on this project. When we first met at RIT, I got to know his style and what he was capable of doing. When I shared my thesis idea with him, we both agreed that the film would be a very interesting but challenging project. I first wrote down my stories and memories and sent them to him along with a lot of old photos so to bring him into the atmospheres of my past experiences. After that, I tried to find a lot of music samples to send to the composer that I thought might convey the mood and tone of the film. Meanwhile, he sent me music ideas and music samples. Every sample he sent to me was very different from the others. I could clearly see that he was exploring the styles and feelings, just like what I was doing with the visuals. After a lot of trials and failures, we both finally agreed that the main instrument would be the Guzheng, plus some strings. Its music would be somewhat unconventional, but it was very suitable for *Mist*. The manner Nicholas uses the Guzheng in the sound score is different from the Chinese traditional way, but I did not "correct" him, because the "difference" was something that I wanted. The result was wonderful and

both Nicholas and I are very happy about the how the music and the visuals really complement and collaborate with each other in the film.

EXPERIMENTING AND PRODUCTION

For a narrative film, experimentation mostly occurs in the pre-production stage. However, when working on an experimental film, experimenting throughout the film was necessary, although it created a continuous and challenging workload. Virtually half of my time creating *Mist* was spent in experimentation.

For the first month of production, I literally experimented with everything at hand. This was the part that I enjoyed most, but it could also be frustrating at times. Just as many experimental filmmakers do, I enjoyed the freedom I had. That is to say, as long as I could discover compelling visuals within the film, I could do whatever I wanted to do.

I viewed Youtube, Vimeo, Pinterest and Tumblr everyday as part of my research in order to discover the materials and techniques to create the visuals. There are many videos on the Internet that reveal interesting experimentation and amazing effects. Some of the videos showed footage that was difficult to understand on how they were created. When I found an interesting video, I would try to discover how the visuals were made, and I would attempt to recreate similar techniques and shoot footage using my cellphone. Eventually, I shot lots of footage on my cellphone with some very beautiful results.

The principal materials I experimented with and found very useful were: ink, water, alcohol, oil, milk, air, lights, food colors and detergents. Different combinations of

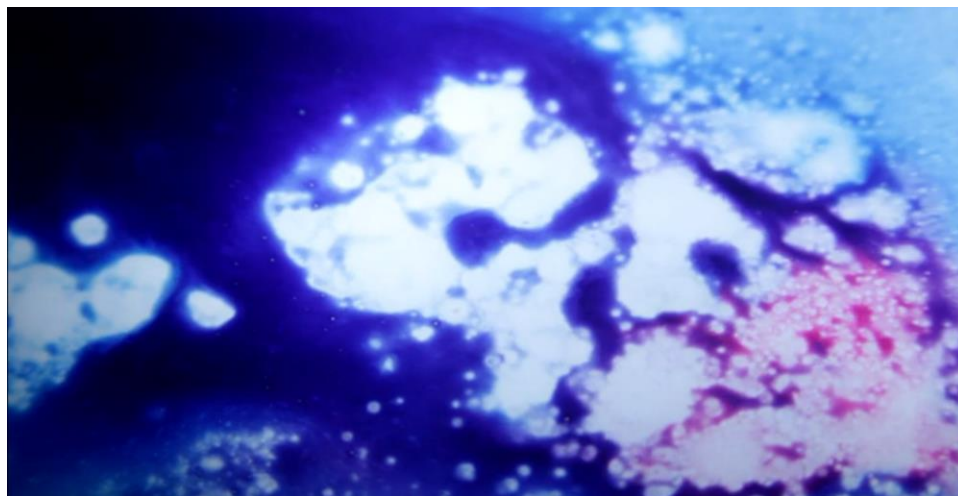


FIG F: Some of the visual results of experiments

these materials on different surfaces gave many different reactions and effects and looks. Some were very traditional and predictable effects. For example, dripping ink into water results in the ink dissolving slowly and gradually dispersing in the water in interesting variations of patterns and movements. It's a very attractive effect, but the technique of ink in water has been used in many existing works. To me, it lacked the touch of innovation. I thought this ink in water could be used modestly in my film, just as was done in *Virtuos Virtuell*. Additionally, the visuals in the film depended on the execution of a variety of creative experiments and their presentation and compositions within the film.

In the production of *Mist*, I found three critical variations of my experiments that gave the resulting visuals their very unique qualities and impact within the film. They are:

1. Tool selections were critical. For example, the use of a dropper gave very different results from those where a syringe was used to add liquids to other liquid media. With a syringe, you can closely control the speed and direction of the added liquid that affects the kinds and movements of the patterns and the movement of all the liquids together. During experimentation I found tools that worked with different media well and I was always looking for and trying new tools.
2. Food color and Indian ink worked very well for my film. I experimented with all the different inks I found in an art store. Because inks are actually chemicals with different properties each, working with them produces a variety of results. Food colors gave the best result in shooting. The density of

allows them to slowly dissolve in water, but also allows the back light to pass through them.

3. Surfaces made differences. I used glass panes, translucent plastic films, watercolor papers, Chinese art papers and even paper towels. I placed the surface of my choice on a light table, then poured or brushed some water on the surface as the base for my experiments. The results using different surfaces always surprised me.

There were a lot of other techniques that I discovered after hours and hours of experimentation. Some of the visuals that resulted from my experimentation are presented in next page.

In this method, I first put a translucent plastic film on the light table to soften the back light. On the top of the plastic film I laid a piece of glass so that I could easily wash the ink and other materials. Following this, I brushed a thin layer of water on the piece of glass with the pattern I wanted. This set up was now ready for shooting with a downshooter camera with the desirable angle and composition for a shot.

After I pushed the record button, I dropped ink droplets into the water. I waited for a second to allow the ink to dissolve into the water. At first the ink moved fast along the water creating a pattern. Then it slowed down and started to fade. When the movement finally settled down I sprayed some alcohol all over the ink pattern. Consequently, the chemical reactions began between the ink and alcohol and lasted for a few seconds, creating all kinds of random motions and textures. Then, I sprayed a layer of oil over the ink and oil mixture and this is where the magic started happening. The oil immediately created another visual that resembled a starry sky. The little bubbles that

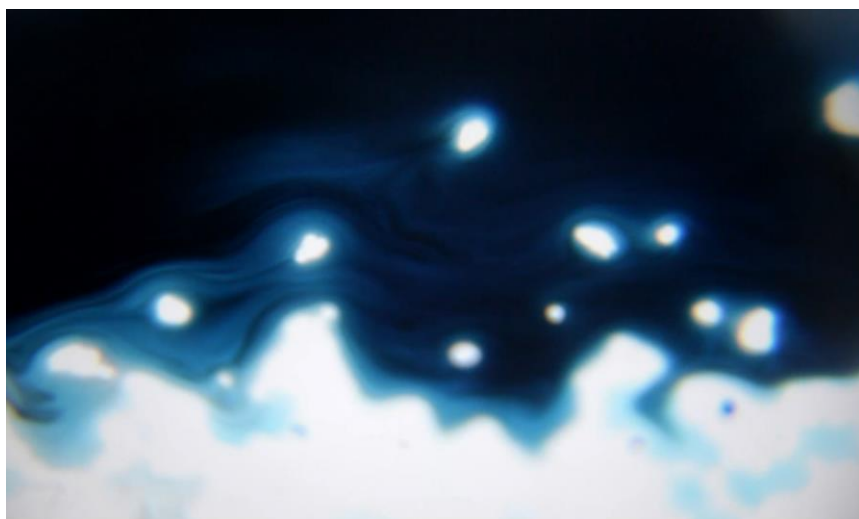
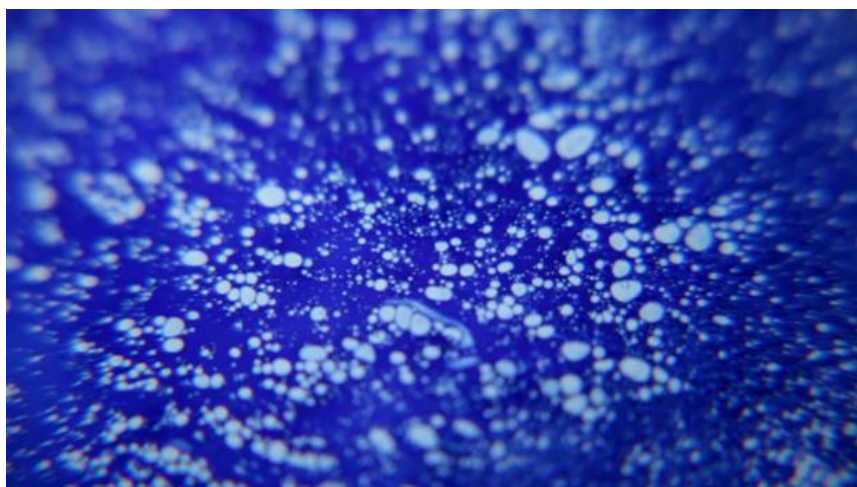
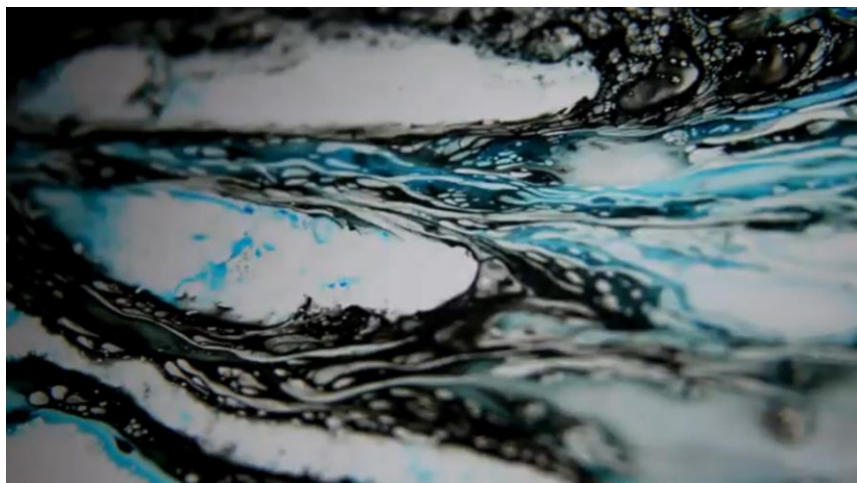


FIG G: Final shootings with a HD camera

appeared allowed the backlight to filter through the dense ink creating a stark contrast between the darkness of the ink and strong light showing through. Afterwards, the little bubbles quickly burst and merged into bigger bubbles allowing more light to pass through. Using a straw and airbrush I blew the ink and bubbles. The stream of air caused the ink and bubbles to flow and merge to one direction. Effectively it created many variations. What's more interesting is how the different liquids had different reactions to the light, which gave the whole image a sense of layers.

Along with this, I experimented with other techniques and created a lot of footage that I felt had potential to be used in my film. One technique I developed used detergent that I put into milk and added food coloring, which created a dynamic turbulence of colors. I also tried various experiments with placing inks on a number of different surfaces, like greased paper, paper towels, and ceramic plates, etc.

Of all the footage that I shot doing various experiments, only less than one quarter was actually used in the final film. This very low usage amount was very frustrating at times and made me lose direction at some point. There was a great freedom during the experimentation stage and I had so many fantastic and meaningful looking sequences, and I really wanted to show all of them in the final film. However, two reasons prevented me from doing this. Firstly, I simply could not include the hours of footage I generated into a five-minute film. The second reason was that there were so many diverse styles and visual looks throughout all the sequences that it seemed impossible to harmonized them into one cohesive work. I had to make choices, which was very hard for me. It is human nature to not give up the things we love. And, as I really loved so many of the sequences I had created, I suddenly lost my direction with the work. I even forgot the reason I was

making this film and I struggled for a time about how I could make the best use of all the good footage. I had a conversation about this with Prof. Stephanie Maxwell. She told me that this was very common in making an experimental film, and she faced it with every project she created. The key here was to fully understand what we wanted to express in the film, and make choices based on that. Giving up some footage was just what we had to do. With all that in my mind, I finally made decisions on what sequences were pertinent to my idea and I then reshot them all using an HD camera this time.

COMPOSITING

Compositing was relatively easy when I had clarity on the structure of the film and I selected the best footage. Most of the compositing was done in After Effects, then edited with the music in Premiere.

During the compositing, I was able to exercise a lot of control over the film as a filmmaker. I first cleaned up the raw footage by clearing out unwanted image debris in the backgrounds and cropping sequence frames to eliminate distracting and useless elements in the frame. I saved these new sequences as separate files. The most challenging part in this process was cleaning up backgrounds and color correction. Most of the filming was done in my “home studio,” which constituted a very rough, improvised set up. As a result of this hands-on, rough approach there were many unwanted artifacts appearing in the footage, as well as an unevenness in lighting quality from shoot to shoot. Since a consistent lighting setup was hard to achieve, continuity throughout the film relied on the postproduction. During postproduction, I spent the most of my time cleaning backgrounds and making sure that there was a consistent look throughout the whole film.

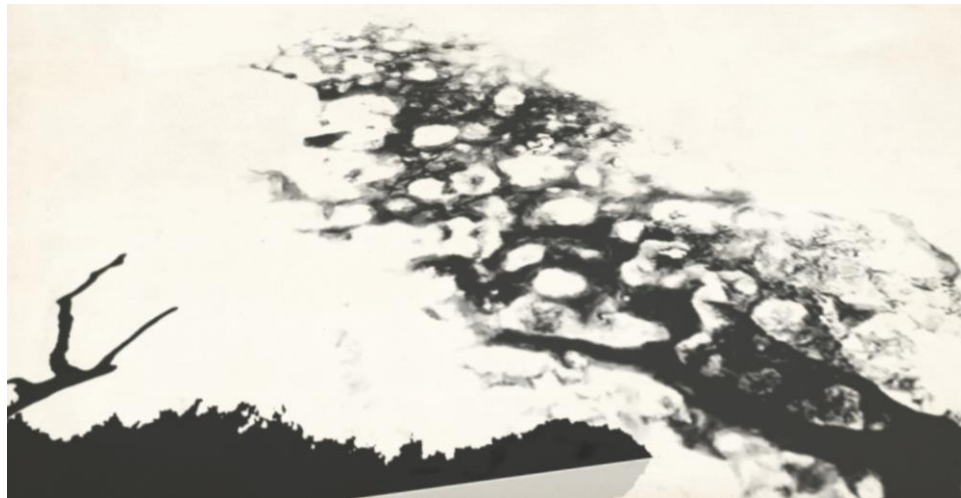


FIG H: Some visuals from the compositing attempts

When I finally put the edited materials into After Effects I found that I was just as free as I was in the experimental stage. Color adjusting, different compositions, changing speed rates, footage order arrangements, overlapping and cameral movements, etc. allowed me to exert a maximum of artistic control.

The decisive criterion for me to make choices at this stage was to synchronize the image with the music in a complementary way. After one year of on-going polishing, the music had the same emotional structure as my film. That is to say, once I hit the beats of the music, I constructed the same emotional structure with the visuals. This was the basic goal of the compositing. What was more important was to harmonize both the image and the music without mechanically synchronizing the imagery with every note of the music. I tried to let the image lead the music most of time, and allow the music to dominate at other times.

CRITIQUE RECEPTION/FEEDBACK

My thesis animation, *Mist* was completed and presented at the SOFA screenings on May 17, 2015. This was the first year that SOFA graduate thesis students did not have to have a respondent to talk about their film. Instead, each student had to present an artist's statement to the audience following the screening of their film. Before the final screening, I was a little worried that the audience might ask me what the film was about. I really did not want to use my own personal knowledge and motivations of my film to evaluate their interpretations. But it turned out that most of the audience seemed to know knew how to appreciate an abstract film and put more focus on the visuals and music. Some people complimented me on the success of the compositing, and others said they

really liked the beauty in the film. And finally, in this version of the final film the sound was too high in places and some feedback were remarks on this problem.

After the screening, on May 18th, 2015, I received Prof. Peter Murphey's e-mail and his personal critique about my film. Following are some comments he made in the e-mail:

*"I ... thought it looked beautiful, as well as effectively making the emotional transitions you were aiming for. I loved the score as well. My one small critique would be that there were a few moments when I could clearly see the materials used for what they were (dripping paint, water, etc) and when that happened I was pulled out of the experience. When you distorted things by the way they were framed, timed or sequenced they immersed me more fully. The moments of being pulled only happened a few times and that reaction may be a matter of taste rather than anything else. Despite those minor flaws, I thought overall the film was VERY successful!"*¹⁰

Faculty feedback was generally positive, and student opinions were very interesting to hear. So all in all, I thought it was a successful screening with some constructive feedback.

CONCLUSIONS

The process of making this film was a very important experience to me as an animator. Just as I mentioned earlier, this was the first time I had attempted to make an experimental film. To be honest, I knew nothing about experimental work at the beginning of my studies at RIT. And this was also just like the first time I came to RIT

¹⁰ Peter Murphey, e-mail message to author, May 18th, 2015.

and entered the graduate program in SOFA without any background at all in animation. I did not know what timing was, and I did not know what storyboards were. But with three years of study and practice, I learned so much and it all worked out very well.

Making an experimental film was also a very special and novel experience. It is totally different from 3D animation, which I had done earlier. In 3D animation, you can plan ahead of time, and once you have everything ready, it becomes all about executing. However, experimental film is a whole different story. It's unpredictable, it's open and it's a journey!

The seemingly endless period of experimentation made me worry about whether I could ever finish the film. I did not even touch After Effects before the end of first semester. I was so panicked at times with hundreds of sequences stored on my old laptop, worrying and wondering how and if they would be useful in the final version of my film. Also, I worked with my composer closely through the whole year just for the five minutes long music, and so many tries and retries with the music score were an ongoing involvement and concern. Because of the nature of experimental film, a lot of spontaneous ideas had to be carried out through experimentation. Because I was using some very unusual materials, media and processes I could not experiment at school and had to rig a studio at home to be able to work freely. One time, I actually set up a shoot on top of a toilet seat cover in the bathroom because the height of the toilet was perfect for shooting and the darkness of the bathroom gave me better control over the lighting.



FIG I: Shooting happened in my “home made” studio

After making this film, I fully understood the importance of flexibility to a filmmaker. I never thought I would film my thesis on the cover of a toilet! I also never thought I would shoot exciting footage with my cellphone. I tried everything at hand to explore possibilities for generating the artwork: ink, oil, alcohol, salt, detergent, milk, coffee, paper towel, glass, magnifier, and so much more.

I was so glad that I made an experimental film. It was the right choice because I had so much fun during the whole year and got the chance to experience so many new and beautiful things that exist in life, and which I would never have gotten a chance to experience if I did not make this film. The whole process was like magic. In the beginning, you do not know where to go, but you follow your instinct. You try and fail, and succeed sometimes too. You interact with the materials and trust them. They might not teach you what will work, but they definitely tell you what won't work. Eventually, at some point, you surprisingly find out that you've made a film.

Appendix A: Original Proposal

MIST

(working title)

Animated MFA Thesis Production
by Huan Liao

March 2014

Approved for submission by:

Faculty Advisor, Stephanie Maxwell

Project: *Mist* (working title)

Genre: Experimental Animation in 3D

Length: 4 minutes

Synopsis

Mist is an abstract, experimental animated film based on my childhood memories and imagination. An overriding experience of insecurity envelops my life and reoccurring dreams and imaginings are like abstractions of real scenes. In weaving visual, motional, and sonic elements together the past is recreated as an abstract examination of my life.

Idea

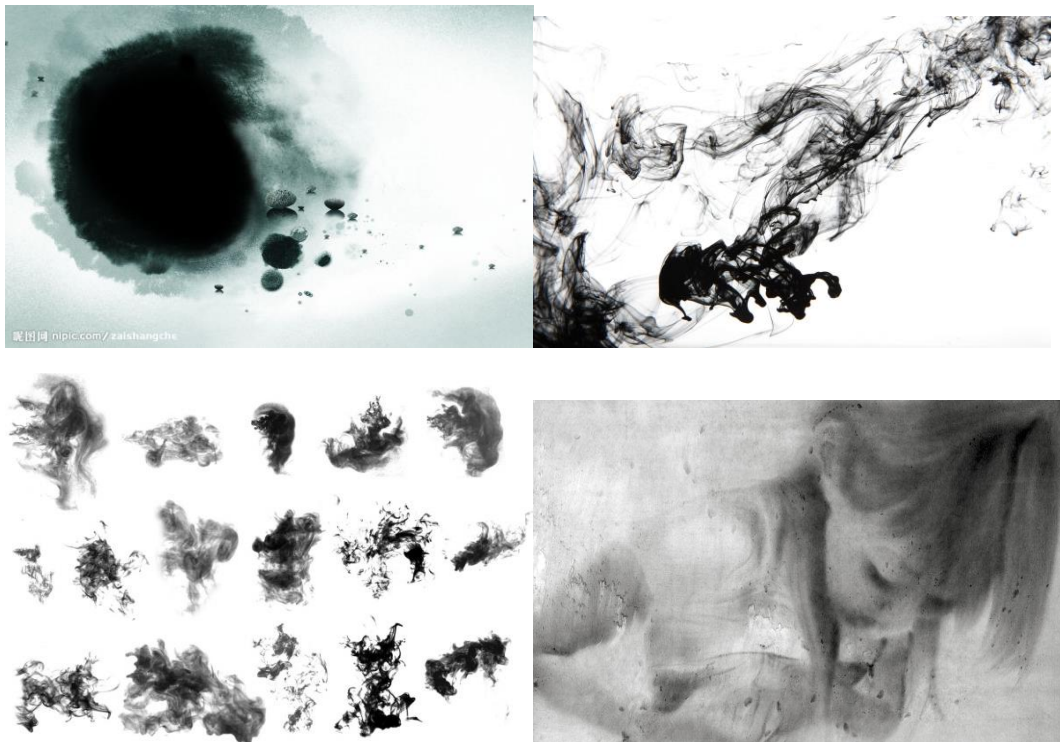
Certain recurring images from my childhood memories or imaginings have kept haunting me in my dreams over the past twenty years. Such as the place I lived when I was a baby (I had been given away by my natural parents who did not raise me for the first six years of my life), my nanny's dark shiny hair, the wood coffin in a dark forbidden room, a pink shampoo bottle, my nanny being pulled by her hair across a room by a stranger, ... I believe these recollections and imaginings must be very important to me, or in some way they must have played a major role in forming my characteristic. I experience a feeling of insecurity all the time and always feel I never belong where I am. *Mist* is my attempt to create a personal documentary that relies on abstraction to transport the audience into the emotional landscape of my life.

Techniques

This animation will be created by using mostly 3D that will be combined with 2D and live action techniques when needed. Software like Maya, After Effects and Zbrush will be involved.

Visual Style

I wish to develop an interesting and cohesive visual style that uses ink in brush paintings as well as to create a fluid sense of landscape and emotion throughout the work. Some samples of ink images are presented as follows:



Music

Since *Mist* is based on my personal experience, I want the work to convey some of my background and nature. I have been a musician and I play the Chinese traditional instrument called “GuZheng”, which is an instrument that when you hearing its really makes one think of China. The traditional music played on this instrument can only have very few layers, but the sense of space, atmosphere, feeling and time can be very strong. I will collaborate with a music composer who will develop the score for this work, and a musician who will play it.

TIMELINE																																	
Year	2014 Spring																																
Month	May(05/04)				June(06/01)				July(06/29)				Aug.(08/03)				Sep.(08/31)				Oct.(10/05)												
Week	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4							
Sound Design																																	
Music	Find a composer and a musician. Collect music examples.								Continue Communicating with composer				1st 30 seconds sample				Continue Communicating with composer				1st draft music				1st 30 seconds revision								
Sound Recording	Building up sound effect libaray												Preparing sound recording				Recording				Editing												
Visual Design																																	
Mood boards	Collect visual style samples				Mood board				Extract visual elements				Rough				Final				Rough				Final								
Abstract Visual Elements Extracting																																	
Storyboards																																	
Animatic																																	
Experimentation and Process Development													Experimentation and process development												1st 30 seconds experiment and render				Revised 1st 30 seconds and final looking				
modeling																																	
Rigging (if needed)																																	
Animating																																	
Texturing																																	
Lighting																																	
2D Part																																	
Live Action																																	
Rendering																																	
P.S.																																	

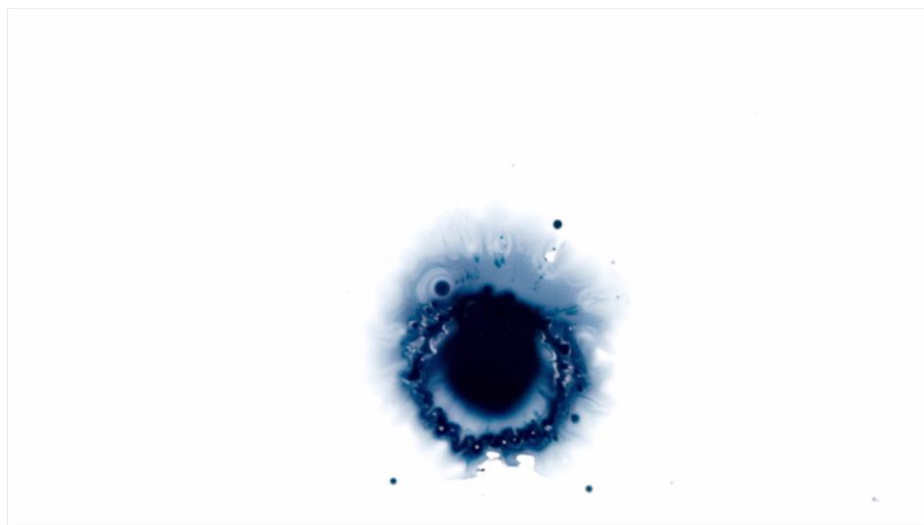
TIMELINE																													
Year	2015																												
Month	Nov.(11/02)				Dec.(11/30)					Jan.(01/04)				Feb.(02/01)				March(03/01)				April(03/29)					May (05/03)		
Week	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	
Sound Design																													
Music	Composer communication and music revision																												
Sound Recording	Working with image, recording extra sound as needed																			Final sound editing									
Visual Design																													
Mood boards																													
Abstract Visual Elements Extracting																													
Storyboards																													
Animatic																													
Experimentation and Process Development																													
modeling																													
Rigging (if needed)																													
Animating																													
Texturing																													
Lighting																													
2D Part																													
Live Action																													
Rendering																													
P.S.	Test rendering																			final rendering									

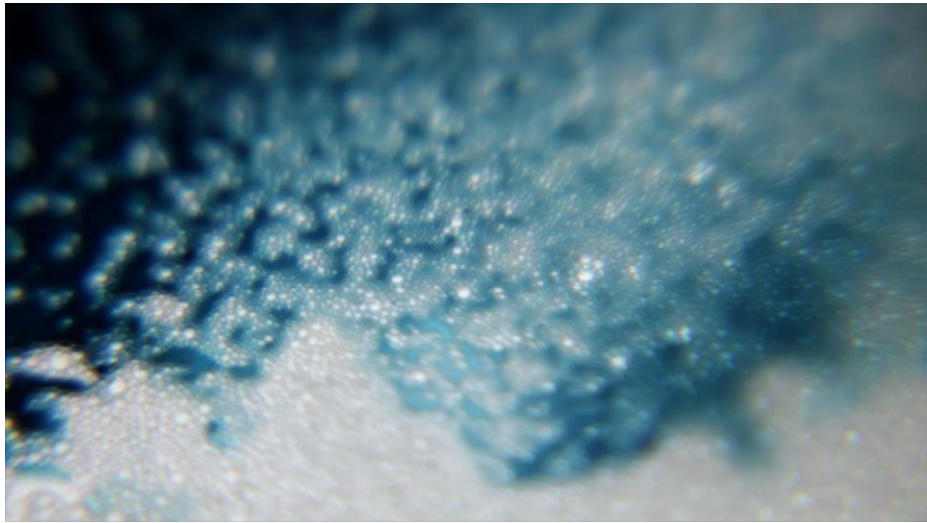
Credits,
color
correctio
n and
final
work

SOFA
screening

BUDGET			
Preproduction / production			
Item Description	Unit Cost	Quantity	Total
Composer and Musician	/	/	In - Kind
Sound Recording Equipment (702 or Zoom kit) and Studio	/	/	In - Kind
Music Production Software (ProTool)	/	/	In - Kind
3D Production Software(MAYA, Zbrush and AE)	/	/	In - Kind
Computer Equipment	/	/	In - Kind
Production Laboratory	/	/	In - Kind
Sony HD Camera and Accessories	/	/	In - Kind
Office and Art Supplies	5	20	100
Transportation Cost	10	10	100
Postproduction			
Editing Software (Premeire)	/	/	In - Kind
Sound Processing Software	/	/	In - Kind
Production & Distribution Media	10	20	200
Distribution Festival Fees	25	20	500
Project Website Maintenance	1	100	100
Total Cost			1000

Appendix B: Images from “*Mist*”









*Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the MFA degree
in the School of Film and Animation
Rochester Institute of Technology*

@2015 Huan Liao

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Fig. A. “毛泽东：老蒋挖我祖坟大失民心必败无疑(图),” *News.ifeng.com*, Digital Image http://news.ifeng.com/history/1/jishi/200810/1028_2663_850072_2.shtml (accessed 15 Nov. 2015)

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Fig. B. “Virtuos Virtuell,” *Artisan Festival International*, Digital Image <http://afiworldpeaceinitiative.org/cannes/> (accessed 15 Nov. 2015)

FIG C: “水墨素材,” *tieba.baidu.com*, Digital Image <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/1493717096> (accessed 15 Nov. 2015)

FIG C: “水墨素材下载,” *Zhituas.com*, Digital Image http://file2.zhituad.com/thumb/201211/02/201211020709166312EKaPH_priv.jpg (accessed 15 Nov. 2015)

FIG C: “Ink Painting,” *sina.cn*, Digital Image <http://s8.sinaimg.cn/middle/5eb7e7f2tcbc2f77084e7&690> (accessed 15 Nov. 2015)

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FIG C: “水墨素材,” *nipic.com*, Digital Image http://pic1a.nipic.com/2008-10-28/2008102893221635_2.jpg (accessed 15 Nov. 2015)

FIG C: “水墨收藏,” *soocang.com*, Digital Image
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